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Self, Non-Self, and Silencing the Self: Dangers and Possibilities

Dana C. Jack

Western Washington University, dana.jack@wwu.edu

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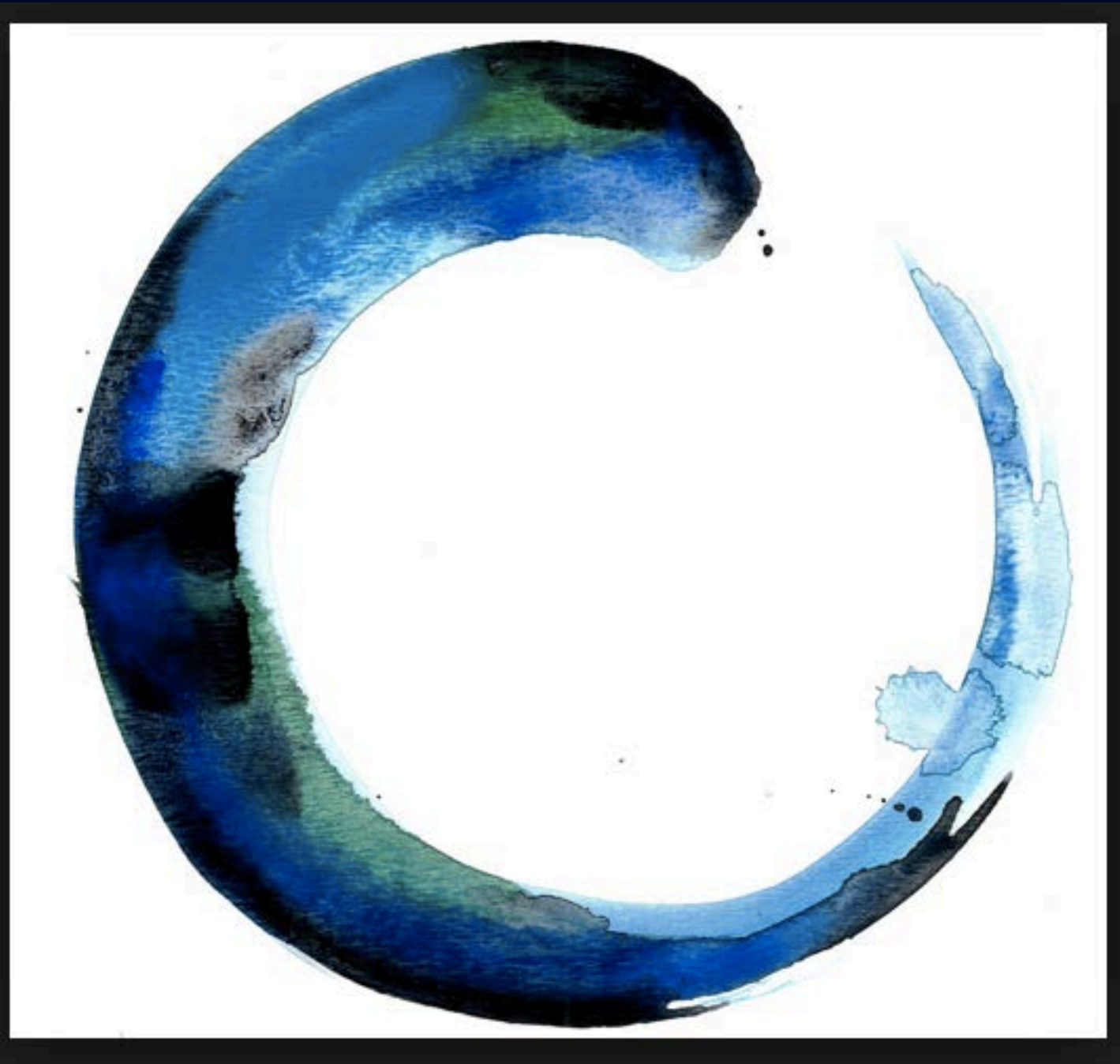
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Self, Non-Self, and Silencing the Self: Dangers and Possibilities

Dana C. Jack, Western Washington University





Pablo Picasso

Melancholy
Woman



Major Questions

- How can selflessness, motivated by a desire to foster close relationships, lead to depression?
- How do Buddhist and Western concepts of self and selflessness differ?
- How aspire to a Buddhist view of compassionate selflessness without appropriating it into narrow Western understandings of selflessness?

Violence, Depression, and Gender

- Depression rates 2x higher in women
- 1 in 3 women experience serious abuse
- Relational factors: Disruption, violence or problems in core relationships most often precede women's depression.
- Humiliation, entrapment, social inequality and lack of control characterize these situations.



ICE CREAM
5522781

The Hygienic PANIPURI in town

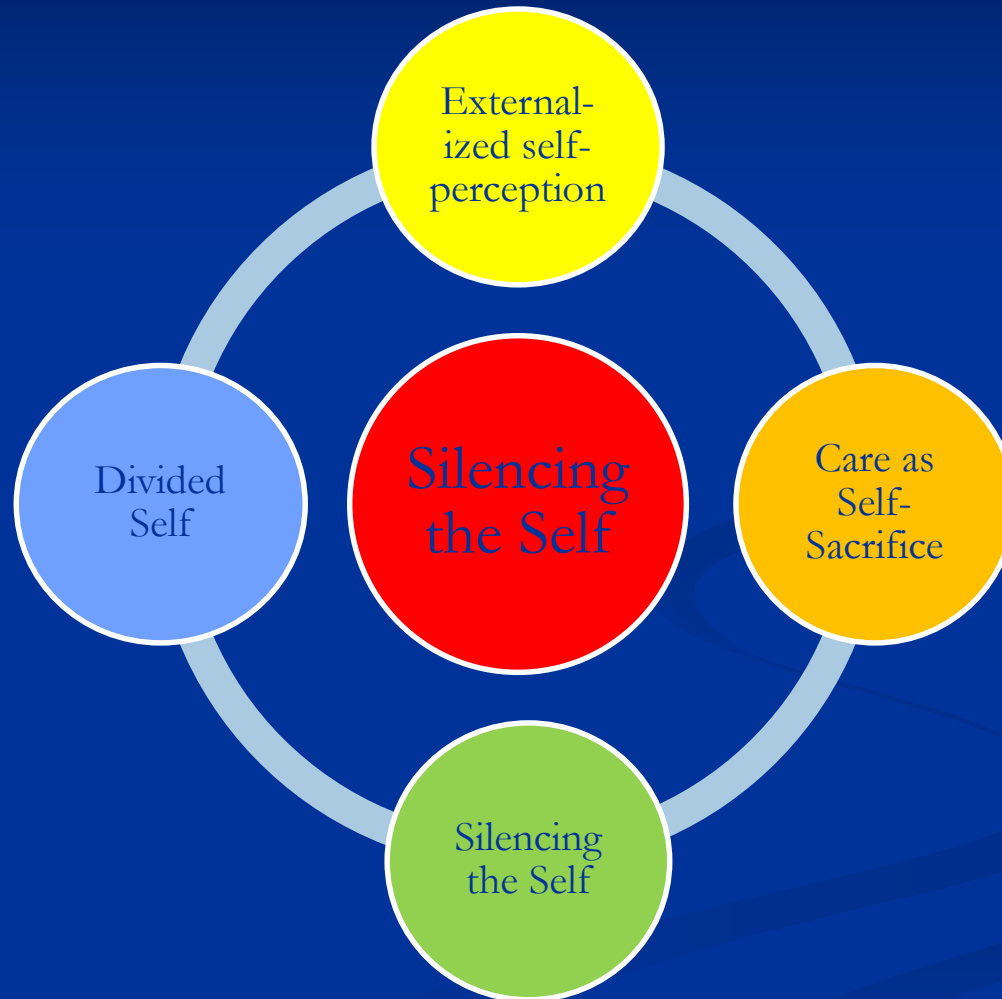
Carlsberg
Old House Cafe & Restaurant
Nestle House, Room No. 101
Patel Durbar Square

पार्किङ्ग
ध्यान सञ्च

What is Silencing the Self?

- Self-silencing – keeping parts of oneself out of relationship. Goals: Create intimacy, harmony, or safety.
- Culturally prescribed feminine attachment behaviors – pleasing, putting others first, maintaining harmony through self-silencing.
- A process of behaviors and inner dynamics; leads to “loss of self” and inner division.

Measuring Silencing the Self



What is Silencing the Self?

- Turning against thoughts and feelings to appear outwardly compliant and pleasing.
- A divided mind. Outward compliance/pleasing with inner resentment toward forsaking the self.
- Leads to disconnection from self and others.
- Disconnection activates pathways of mutual influence among psychological, biological, and social processes → depression.

Self-Silencing Associated with Negative Health Effects

- Depression – predicts future depression in adolescents and adults (Harper & Welsh, 2007; Thompson, 1995)
- Eating Disorders Buchholz et al., 2007; Frank & Thomas, 2003; Geller et al., Hambrook et al., 2011; Oldershaw et al., 2012; Shouse & Nilsson, 2011; Smolak & Munstertieger, 2002; Zaitsoff, Geller & Srikimeswaran, 2002
- Post-partum depression (O'Mahen, Flynn, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2010; Mauthner, 2002; Thompson & Bendell, 2014)
- Lack of self-care among women in cancer treatment (prospective study) (Kayser & Sormanti, 2000a; Kayser & Sormanti, 2000b; Sormanti, 2010).

Self-Silencing Associated with Negative Health Effects

- HIV/AIDS risk (lack of self-protection in sex, see DeMarco, 2010; Jacobs & Thomlinson, 2009; Brody et al, 2010) predicts higher seropositive levels in HIV and lower medication adherence.
- Irritable bowel syndrome (Ali et al., 2000)
- All cause mortality among women in the Framingham Offspring Heart Study (Eaker and Kelly-Hayes, 2010)

The Buddhist View of Self

- Suffering comes from defending, enhancing, grasping after an illusory self.
- “Self” is impermanent, co-dependently arising. Five skandhas – form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness.
- The realization of self’s impermanence and emptiness - Anatta (not self) – A self empty of inherent existence, no ontological status.



Non-self, Anatta

- The heart of Mahayana Buddhist teaching
- Wisdom is the **realization** of selflessness, emptiness.
- Wisdom and compassion are interdependent.
- Selflessness flows from compassion for all sentient beings; self/other distinction dissolved.

Sentences from the STSS

“Caring means putting the other person’s needs in front of my own.” (just read these and next one?)

“Considering my needs to be as important as those of the people I love is selfish.”

“I rarely express my anger at those close to me.”

“One of the worst things I can do is to be selfish.”

Buddhist Teachings

- Ricard – “...selfishness is one of the most basic causes for torment, to bring us a miserable life to ourself and others. One of the main purposes of meditation is to get rid of that self-centered attitude”
- Selflessness can be pursued with an understanding of self as an illusion. As Santideva wrote, “If you want to be happy, you should never seek to please yourself.”

DIFFERENT KINDS OF SILENCE

- Psychology - Selfless behaviors because of conditioning, fear, self-protection and obedience to an ideal of “goodness.” *The silence of self-oppression.*
- Buddhism – not a failure to speak; a cultivated state of stillness and silence. Allows experience of nature of mind, self, and reality. *The silence of the quieted mind.*

Different Motivations

■ Selflessness leading to depression:

- Obedience to an external, cultural ideal or religious teachings.
- Grasping after permanence, self-clinging.

■ Selflessness of Anatta:

- Seeking freedom *from* the self, fixed concepts

Dangers of Self-Silencing on the Buddhist Path

- Near enemy of Anatta and compassion: self-silencing.
- Turning selflessness into an ideal for self-judgment.
- Mistaking one's motivation – live up to ideal standards based on self-abnegation vs practices and teachings that lead to an altered sense of self: freedom & joy.

The Self is Relational, not Separate



Puzzle

- Cultural context. What are the consequences of ignoring the conditioning around selflessness – that it is part of being a good woman – experienced by many Westerners.
- Articulating how self-silencing views and behaviors may be transformed from promoting depression to promoting flourishing is critically important.

Moving from self-silencing to Anatta

- Bring awareness to one's own selfless actions, their motivation(s) and consequences.
- Experience through meditation/mindfulness that self-silencing motivated by fear of loss and grasping after permanence.
- Develop self-compassion and self-love that rests on realization of interconnection and shared humanity.

Self-silencing and Health

- In a 10 year, prospective study of approximately 1500 men and 1500 women, after adjusting for age, systolic blood pressure, body mass index, smoking, diabetes & cholesterol levels, women who reported “self-silencing” during conflict with their spouse had four times the risk of dying from all causes compared to women who did not. Elaine D. Eaker, et. al. (2005) AHA Meeting. See Eaker & Kelly-Hayes, 2010).
- Men who reported self-silencing had no elevated risk.

What about men's self-silencing?

- Cannot understand gender through examining sex differences
- Men attributing different meanings to STSS items – Nepal study.
- Ussher & Perz (2010) - Mixed methods study of cancer carers. Men silenced as part of “normal” masculinity; women as part of “idealized femininity.” Detrimental to both.

Voice is critical for mental and physical health

- Convergence of neuroscience, evolutionary theory, and psychology that affirms our innate wiring for connection, affiliation and empathy (Siegel, 2010, 2009; Schore, 2003).
- Relational disconnection can initiate multiple pathways of mutual influence among psychological processes, physiology, and the social world that together precipitate depression.

Western Views of Self

- Long history – sense of self as unique individual, distinct and stable set of internal attributes and goals.
- Development toward independence, autonomy; sense of a “same” self over time.
- Distinguish oneself from others through individual achievements, and by actualizing unique talents.

Why is Voice So Important for Mental and Physical Health?

VOICE BRINGS US INTO CONNECTION.

The ability to speak and to be heard is associated with psychological, social, and physical well-being.

Large literatures on “talk therapy” (superior to anti-depressants alone), trauma, and experimental disclosure, for example.

Different Kinds of ‘Non-Self’

- “Loss of self” - Refers to loss of agency, purpose, vitality.
 - Experience of a divided mind, inner arguments, which self is “real?”
- “Loss of self” in Buddhism – Refers to positive move, beyond self-grasping to unconditioned mind, ultimate reality.